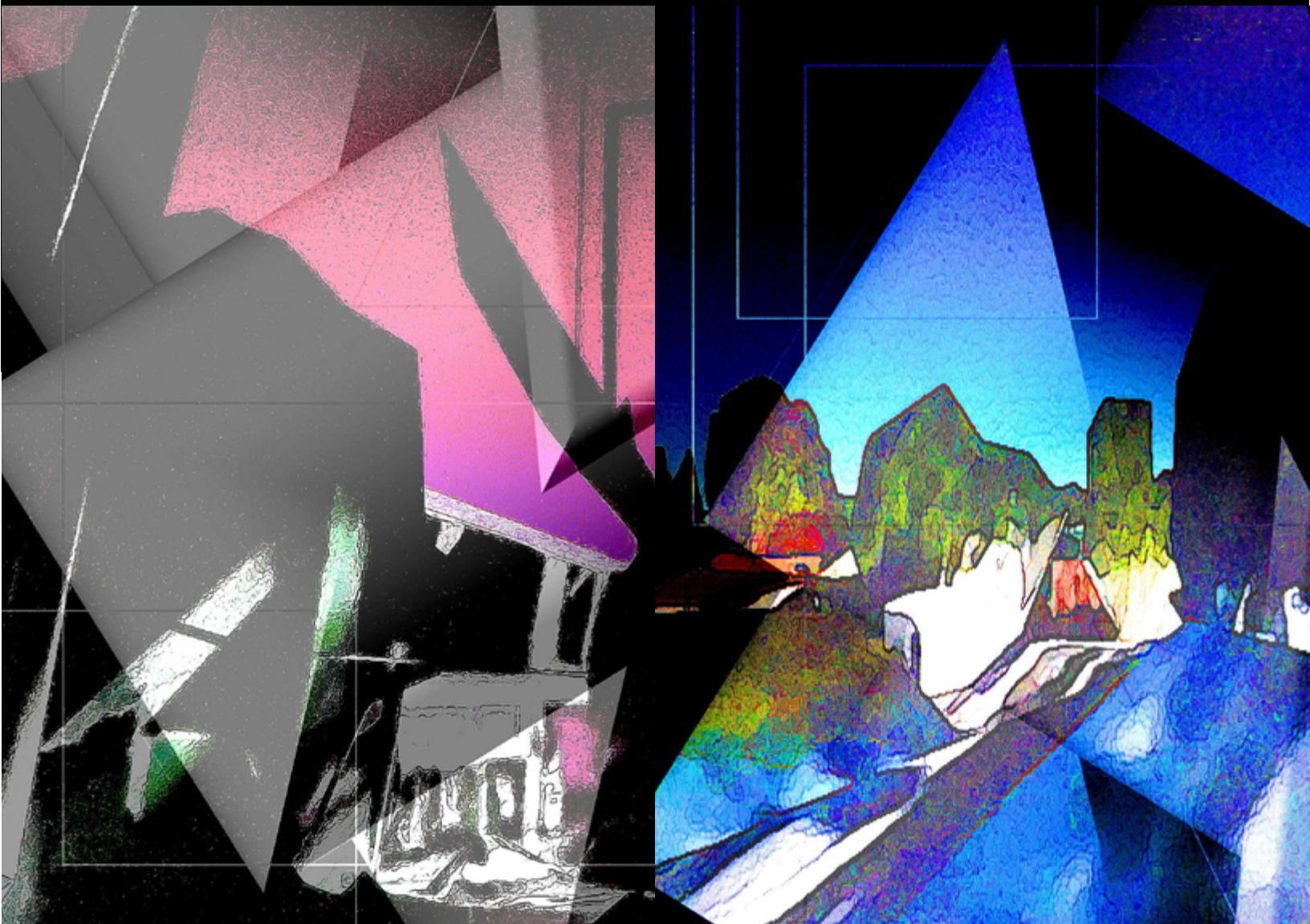


# OBRA/ARTIFACT

Issue 2 / Spring 2017



Amber Norman // Sarah Bigham // Stephen Mead // Adedayo Adeyemi Agarau  
Jon Chopan // Reece Rogers // Artyv K // Eva Cherokee El Beze // Clive Aaron  
Gill // Jenny Fan Raj // Boris Glikman // Dave Clark // Clark Zlotchew // Ryan  
Shane Lopez // Douglas Luman // Bruce Sager // Hannah Lamb-Vines // J.  
Bradley // Maurice Smith // Amy Jackson // Seth Simon // Alex Nodopaka

## NO. 2 / TECHNOLOGIC

Our second issue explores a facet of our future as unique as it is ubiquitous: technology, and the logic behind it. As alternative realities proliferate throughout the digital sphere, Obra/Artifact seeks to find the line between digital truth and falsehood through an artistic exploration of the “facts” of everyday living. This issue deals in privation and performativity, in what grounds us and what degrades us as we delve further into an electronic endgame where everything is pertinent and nothing is certain.

The essayists we've selected examine the implications of a population whose pursuit of happiness has become forever entangled in the devices at their fingertips, joining our fiction storytellers to take a necessary step into the future in an attempt to divine how living digitally may end up tying our hands behind our backs. The poets whose work we've curated respond with an exposition of the illusive materiality of a life lived online and in the flesh, working through formerly physical spaces that have become eroded by the ethereal nature extant inside a world of vanishing limitations.

As always, we sincerely hope that you enjoy the journey.

The Obra/Artifact Team

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# ESSAYS



I used to be a housewife, the kind that lies to her husband with girdles and throws chunks of meatloaf at the back of his head. Hidden behind aprons and boxed mac and cheese, my true ingredients are lost. My opinions become prepackaged, censored with thick foundation that cakes around my smile lines like Betty Crocker. Just add water and watch me dissolve into a pale and uninspiring mixture of lumped disguise.

Wednesday is Pot Roast Night! It's the only meal I make from scratch, except for the seasonings that come in a sachet. No one must know, so I will post "Organic!" online. Our wedding anniversary is coming up on the 4th of this month. Even though my husband hasn't slept with me in twelve weeks, the filter on our photo needs to be just right. I've been keeping track of our enmity—there's an app for that.

The self-help book that advises I squeeze my boobs twelve times a day to feel better about myself is collecting dust. I cannot connect with the bright-eyed woman with a New York Times Bestseller sticker covering half of her forehead. I feel no guarantees or credence, just familiar failure.

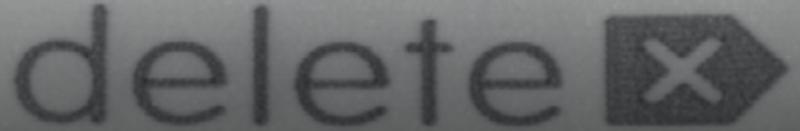
A frazzled woman, sitting alone and face down at her newly Cloroxed kitchen table, would be a much more convincing book cover. Perfectly poised gurus and postcard sunrises are reproduced symbols of ascension, but I just don't want to feel that perfect.

I passed Home Economics. I can parent flour and boil the perfect egg. And I can muddle a cherry at the bottom of an Old Fashioned better than any broad on the cul-de-sac because my blood tastes like bourbon. Walls stained this black cannot be purified with Ajax and distilled vinegar. There is no alkaline diet for the acid inside.

I have a chemical imbalance. My cells are imposters, trapped in a singular dimension; even when penetrated, I feel nothing. The last I remember feeling anything was the squeeze of my mother's vaginal walls, opening to let me breathe. Then she placed me in a lace embroidered bassinet on the other side of the room and told me not to be needy. Better Homes and Gardens never planted anything substantial.

My womb has been left unused by the man who demands I fuck his boss every quarter for promotions. All the mirrors in the house are broken, which is why my eyes cannot connect with the glistening guru lady who is trying to help me. All I see are two noses—two slanted realities. Conceal the depressed parts, and limit your admiration to my augmentations. I can only tend to my wounds in corners I can't escape until the timer beeps: 25 Likes!

I change my mind—Inner beauty is for ugly people.



The receptionist at the compound pharmacy I visit often was a person who made me stare the first time, a woman who looked just as I had always wished that I did.

Alanna had gorgeous, reddish-roan hair with naturally lush curls, the kind I always wanted instead of the lank and luster-less brown hair I got. (There was hope in the early days, when I had hair the color of newly hatched chicks, but as I grew taller, my hair grew darker.)

She had large, luminous eyes, unlike the tiny blue ones that seem inlaid in my face like the raisins on a gingerbread man, pushed in by thumbs eager to get a tray into the oven. Alanna's were a mesmerizing shade of jade, color-flecked with brown in a way that made them seem like those geode rocks in mountain tourist traps, cracked in half to reveal their multi-faceted crystal sparkle.

Her skin was covered in adorable freckles instead of the rashy, pasty dermatological covering I wound up with, itchy and filled with blood-red pinprick spots from an as-yet undiagnosed autoimmune condition.

\*\*\*\*\*

She smiled to greet me as I surreptitiously reached down to scratch the rash on my calves, and I was filled with the kind of envy other women have for

Beyoncé or Selena Gomez or Priyanka Chopra or supermodels in string bikinis. Even her name was perfect—all pleasure and vowels that rolled around in my mouth. She was the most beautiful woman I had ever met in real life.

My sporadic visits gave me a view of Alanna's evolution into her own version of beauty. First, it was the bright red facial skin I couldn't help but notice when I entered the waiting area. A skin peel, she explained happily. Her dermatologist had told Alanna that with enough peels, her freckles would fade so as to become practically unnoticeable. I tried to smile as I signed for my prescriptions with the pen that hundreds of hands had touched.

I visualized the skin "imperfections" of my loved ones: the keloid scar on my wife's throat that reminds me how lucky I am that a possible medical diagnosis was wrong; the spots on my mother's hands (the ones she says make her look old) that are part of the gentle hands that have hugged me for years and intertwine with mine when we walk together these days; the strawberry birthmark my sister once had on her shoulder—gone now, but marking her invisibly as the precious human she is. My skin, too, reflects my travels through life (including a bout with chickenpox), and while I would love to lose the current rash, I will gladly keep the rest as a reminder of who I am and who I used to be.

\*\*\*\*\*

Her hair shaded progressively darker until Alanna had a mane of glossy dark chocolate, without a trace of the red that had made it so irresistible to me. Several weeks later I walked in to see that Alanna had started going to the hairdryer blow out places that are now so popular—her gorgeous curls now in straight lines, lacquered in place as if with corset stays.

Then it was the tinted contacts, in a violet color that no doubt looked ravishing on Elizabeth Taylor, but looked so wrong on the green-eyed receptionist. At least she still had her freckles. They were somewhat faded, but still quite visible. I sighed in relief. The skin peels must have been too painful or too expensive. Thank goodness.

At my last visit, Alanna's deep brown, straightened hair had been chopped off into something a magazine must have proclaimed to be "short and chic." She sat with the same smile, but with fake hair and fake eyes, and I realized her freckles were gone. They marked her neck and cleavage and arms and hands in the array I loved, but they had been erased from her face, which was the color of printer paper.

I cried out inside. For her at 40, when she has grown into herself as a woman and realizes, as all women do, what beauty they had but never saw at the time. For her at 70, when she realizes she has lived more than half her life in the wrong skin. For her mother, who gave birth to a baby who fought so hard to change her looks, the looks her mother must have loved, the looks inherited from generations before her. For her sisters, whom she said looked "just like her," who would never again see themselves reflected in her face. And for her future children, who may one day emerge looking as Alanna once did. Children who, as they grow, will be unable to find themselves in her.



The found object is also the finding one in the science of time meets person meets location. Many sculptors who work in metals keep large scrap piles in their yard. They never know when the light might shine just right on a particular piece. Assemblage artists often scour streets, alleys, shores, the sides of roads, their eyes the precise ones of owls and their fingers Geiger counting. Collage artists stockpile paper scraps torn from magazines or found in boxes of bequeathed memorabilia. Seamstresses and tailors hoard fabric; knitters, yarn.

Think of Rumpelstiltskin spinning straw into gold, or the little thrill of finding the most perfect cashmere coat in a thrift shop; even before trying it on, you know the fit will be fine. Even if you can't afford to move, if you rearrange the furniture, change the color of couch covers or curtains, maybe the urge to get going will abate for a while. I read of a family who was so poor that all they could afford were cardboard furnishings. They shellacked, they varnished, they polished, and the tones of beige shone honeyed gold.

Set along the stair banister in my hallway is a long table top, hand-made I assume. Perhaps it was a school project or some other hobby that's gone out of fashion. I found it waiting for the dump truck, someone feeling that its usefulness had been outlived. Still, they were thoughtful enough to bag up its legs and tape them to the back. It was its inlaid tiles, framed by a dark oak, which caught me. There are four of them, perfect foot and a half squares of smoky ochre. Each is cut into a design which fits with its neighbor jigsaw-geometrical: octagons within circles within triangles within ellipses. The whole thing looks, at moments, Byzantine, a fragment of a temple continuing to find some part in me which I did not know that I had lost.

## **Reawakened Dirge to Pilgrims Breathing Vacant**

(For Victoria, Uyo and Laura)

ئىچرەللىانى و ھەللى انى (inna lillahi wa inallah-e-raji'oon), how do we survive a city settling the bodies of fragments, searching for truths in the castle where memories are scattered on the walls like graffiti, in a song that tastes like dirge? I remember this city, a land of promises, where boys wear their hopes around their neck and make home in a community of sand and dust, and stars walk into dark rooms to paint dreams like children. I remember this road that takes mothers into the body of coppers, girls into the nostrils of lovers; there is a garden of roses we must not pluck for the decoration of homelanders' burials.

ئىچرەللىانى و ھەللى انى (inna lillahi wa inallah-e-raji'oon), someone is wearing a mascara of tears and her body is sending a signal of loss.

ئىچرەللىانى و ھەللى انى (inna lillahi wa inallah-e-raji'oon), we must all search into fallen walls for epitaphs. Someone must have said something about leaving.

Your daughter ran to me one afternoon after a boy broke her heart. She wore your skin like absence and carried her body like pain and she needed a mother for healing, then you ached in my bones like leukemia. I never prayed for a miracle for you. You happened to all the boys, and maybe girls too; that speaks your language. That language of my father and mother and those girls who come visiting with skimpy smiles and underfed feelings I do not understand. You know how it is to have sought for a safe place different from your mother's back, where you were tightened like freedom of speech in a country where the media is sham, or the sprouting chest and flowery eyes of first loves, where nothing is sure and no secrets are safe?

I lived in the city outgrown by the numbers of trees that die in dreams, so my parents were too busy trying to rebuild the city, trying to regrow trees, trying to paint the roads with asphalt. There was no time to see the shape of my heart or my handwriting or what I have written or what I have to say, or what it is I blink in my eyes every time I blink my eyes.

Our church is two miles away. Before it's great door I wrote my first poems, and I showed them to the girls who taught me to laugh at myself. I never really meant a thing to myself, other than moonlight.

Lurking behind a bright sun, I wore my skin in vintage. It was too much for me to bear, and I wrote another poem and laughed at myself some more. I tried my incompetence again and again and again just for laughs. One day a group of boys talked about a woman who lives in a city built in blue walls, and I sought her out. She asked me to define myself and what I write, and I asked the god to teach me to breathe. She touched my eyes to see, and my nostrils inhaled my memories. I am breathing. I am breathing.

Someday, we shall return here, and we shall snifflie the ground for paths we cannot reincarnate in our heads, and that day, we shall crumble our bodies and fit our memories into bottles of beer and sing and sing and seek that we lose our ways and track home (never) again. Old tales will cower on the rocks. The sun will bathe my father's body at seashore, and my mother's eye will be a beach with tears come to wave. I will wonder how men float then 'unfloat' in the water that bathed them from birth.



This is what Jack said when I asked him about the war:

We'd been up in the tower for two hours when a man approached, stopping, fifty yards outside the gate, waving a Kalashnikov and screaming something in Arabic. A voice came over the radio, "Tower, do you have eyes on the man approaching the gate? Do you see a weapon?" Styza grabbed it before I could.

"Roger," he said. "We have eyes on the target."

It was a beautiful day, not hot and oppressive like it could be. I was reminded of a resort town, the type of place families might vacation. The thought of killing this man hadn't even crossed my mind. The radio called in.

"Tower, prepare to fire warning shots."

Styza leveled his weapon. He was shaking so badly that he could hardly hold onto the thing.

"You all right?" I asked.

Styza looked at me, wiping the sweat from his brow.

"Breathe," I said.

Styza lowered his weapon and turned toward me. He looked like he was going to vomit.

"It's okay."

Styza tried to raise his weapon again, but his hands were all over the place. I reached over and pushed his rifle toward the floor. "Slow down," I said. "Let me handle this part."

I shot off a burst ten yards in front of the man and waited, but the man didn't move. A few minutes later another call came over the radio declaring the man a live target, just as Lieutenant Camacho arrived in the tower. He looked at Styza and then trained his

rifle on the target. "What seems to be the problem, gentlemen?" he said, without lowering his weapon. Styza sat in his chair trying to get control of his hands. His rifle rested against his knee. He seemed to be wrestling with something out of reach, slowly realizing that he was being destroyed. I almost felt sorry for him.

"Giving our target ample time to retreat," I said.

"If you're joking right now," Lieutenant Camacho said, "I am not laughing."

The man stood off in the field, firing rounds at random things. Mountains rose behind him, lush things that I hadn't expected to see in a desert country. The sun hovered just behind, covering them in a purple shadow that occluded the features of the man's face. I could see the shape of him, the size and weight. He was heavy-set, and that surprised me. I didn't imagine why he was this way, if he was, for instance, a middle-aged father. I didn't care who he was or why he was standing in this field. I clicked off my safety and adjusted my aim.

Styza reached for me. "Wait," he said, "I can do it. I want to."

"No," I said.

"You don't have to do it."

"I do."

"You won't tell the others, will you?"

I looked at the LT. This whole thing was very pathetic to him. I leveled my weapon, let out a short burst, and watched the man fall to the ground.

Styza began crying then, real tears. We didn't speak for a time. Styza was still sobbing when I reached over and grabbed his weapon away from him. As I slowly pulled his rifle toward me, he came with it, leaned in so that his head came to rest on my knee. There were tears soaking into my pant leg. I handed the weapon to the LT, who looked at me, his eyes full of genuine disbelief. He left us there, ashamed to watch. Styza didn't move from me for some time

but instead let out a series of soft moans. I looked at the mountains as he wept. The sun had sunk behind them, and already there were vultures circling above. The dead man lay on his back. His giant beer belly gave him the look of a sleeping drunk.

When I've told this story before people have asked me what I felt, looking down on the first man I'd ever killed. Nothing, I tell them. I felt nothing for him because he was dead. But Styza, I felt very sorry for him. I knew what he felt like, finally knowing who he was.

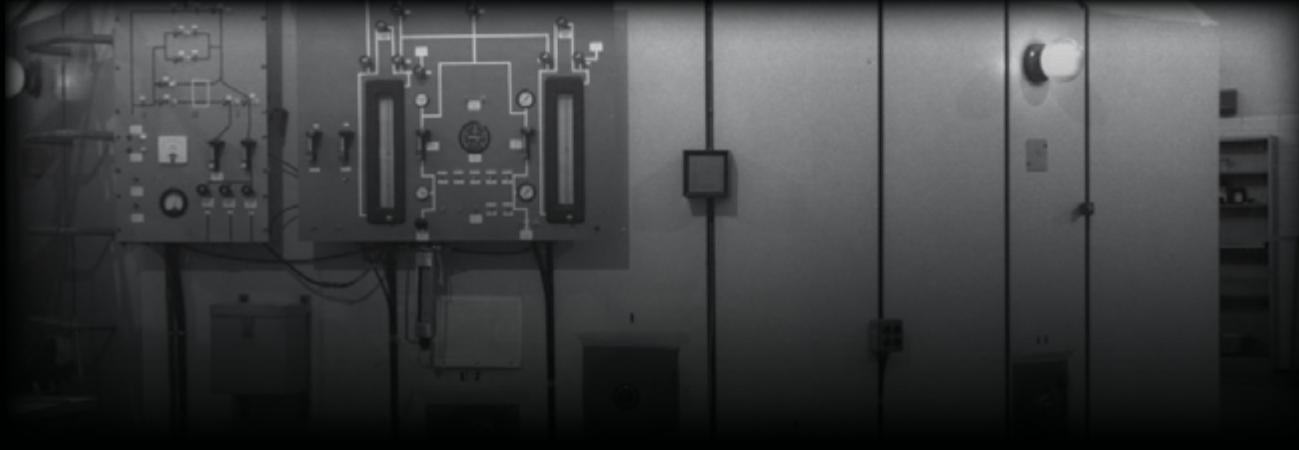


I asked my roommate how he would survive the apocalypse he kept talking about, and he showed me a three-hundred dollar knapsack. Attached to the knapsack were two sections of solar panel that could charge small electronics. I brought my face close to his computer screen and stared at the rectangular grid.

"We'd hike north. Because the sun," he said.

IMAGINAÇÃO

# The Mercenary



He's sitting on the stool, his back stiff and unetherized. His head is fastened between clamps and a longbarrel stares into one eye. It's the right eye; it's the one he used to peer through the look-hole of a boiler to watch furnaces burn, to supply electricity to a million unlit homes and to bring food to our table. It's the eye which roved critically over my math homework, pointing out how my 5's looked like S's, nagging me and prompting me to fix them.

"Don't move," says the lady in white.

He grits his teeth, for he's a stubborn man, doesn't know a fault from a weakness but follows his instructions to the letter. The gun's still trained on the glassy eye while his hands rest on his knees; the fingers grip his thighs to assuage the pain that's yet to come. The same hands which held mine before crossing a busy intersection. The same hands which tapped my knuckles when I made mistakes in arithmetic and forgot the carry-over.

I bite my knuckles and count the shots. The inscription on the machine gun speaks a mystic tongue; it spews chemical names and alleges a German inheritance. Nd YAG laser: a light saber furnished to save lives by the dozen. In the hands of a ruthless mercenary, I wince at every shot that follows. I wonder what she sees at the end of that smoking barrel. A fifty something adult, hairline receding. Another number in her file. Clots in the eye that she needs to unravel to have her Asclepiad duty fulfilled. A target. A victory?

What does she see through his dark, bleeding iris? Can't she see the anastomoses of veins curling deep and pointing towards home? Can't she look past those superficial lenses and discover the sight of a little girl's hero?

"Don't move," she warns again, teeth clenched, and there's renewed silence in the room, a clinical silence while the air conditioner breathes its last. I hold my breath, shiver, dig my teeth into my knuckles, and see the pull of the trigger. Again and again, until I lose count of the ricochets that no daughter ought to witness. The little machine wheezes in rhapsody.

I watch the recoil of his head and the redness spreading in the corners of his eye. I see the grimace and the tears that linger at the lashes. Real men don't cry, he'd tell himself, and it'd be a stupid thing to believe. When it's finally over, she takes a break to check her mail. She flexes her fingers in catharsis and reaches for the phone. My father scrambles out of the chair, looking winded and human. He manages a 'thank you'—he's old fashioned that way—and the mercenary looks up at him and nods, wondering why he bothers.

Her gaze moves to me next, expectant and bored. I wonder if she can read my eyes. Receiving my father's arm, I nod at her.

"Thanks," I say.

# Present Day



Kiss me hard before the tear gas hits the crowd. Look into my eyes in case you get gunned down dirty as a dog in the gutter. Wrap your arms around me as I whisper how much I love you, the last thing you hear before they rip us apart for insubordinate behavior. Walk along the beach at sunset before the soles of our feet bubble and burst. Take a deep breath. Tomorrow, we can buy a gas mask.

Dive into a deep blue ocean while waves are still liquid. Kill a cop before one kills you, leaving your legacy loudly lest they erase the evidence. Rewrite the story. Burn the names recorded of innocent victims fallen too soon. Tear down a wall as you are dragged from your home.

You are guilty until proven innocent. You are innocent unless black, brown, red, or yellow, so burn this mother fucker down, all the way down, look at your plate, is it filled with murder or pacification? Decide where peace begins: with them or me? Decide the only change coming will be one we create, to bulldoze rigged voting booths where they sit up high laughing at our innocent assumption of democracy.



"Did you hear about the school bus drivers?"

"What happened?" Nunila's co-worker, Jessica asked. Both worked in the cafeteria.

"They drove a football team to a high school game on a Friday night. During the game, they taped the camera lens in the bus and locked the doors. But the camera's audio system was still working."

"And..."

"The next week, the Personnel Director called them into her office. She accused them of violating district policy."

"What did they say?" Jessica asked.

"They denied any fault. The Director said, 'Do you want to listen to the audio that was on the bus?'"

Jessica raised her eyebrows. "Then what?"

"Both said, 'No' and resigned."

"Robert, right? I heard you were in this tent. I've been looking forward to meeting you."

I'd seen her mounting her approach from a distance, head coyly cocked to one side, a teasing smile on her lips. She gave an illusion of length, from the feathered earrings dangling along the curve of her neck to tanned legs that ended in narrow feet, silver rings circling her toes. White crocheted crop top, shredded denim shorts. It was a look cultivated from Instagram, indistinguishable from any other twenty-something tech groupie. I grinned in recognition as she placed a cool hand on my arm. "Is this your first time at Burning Man?"

"Nah, it's my third year. Getting old, actually."

She leaned back and worried her lips before smiling again. "But we must remember that change is the only constant. Maharishi Mahesh Yogi is here this year. Care to meet him?"

"I don't do yoga. Maybe you and Cheri can catch a session, or whatever." I nudged Cheri forward with a shoulder. Cheri and I had met last night and had some fun, but she'd been trailing me all day.

"Cheri? I'm Rachel. Nice to meet you." The two women sized each other up. Advantage Cheri. She looked like a young Elle MacPherson, loose blonde hair knotted on the top of her head, full lips now in a pink pout. Nicer ass too. Rachel smiled back at Cheri's frown and I felt a twinge of interest. There was a confidence about her that was intriguing. I'm usually the cocky one.

"Rachel," I said. "Call me Rob. SunTech is hosting a dinner tonight. Join us. I'm flying in chefs from the French Laundry. It'll be sick. You'll love it." I felt

Cheri's resentment rising next to me like steam in the hot desert air, but I shrugged it off. There was something fresh about Rachel.

"Sounds fun, Rob, but I don't do social events anymore. Maya Rai sent me. She's waiting with Mahesh Yogi. Come with me. You'll thank me later, I promise."

Five years ago, I'd have given anything to pull off a camp—an air-conditioned luxury camp with Sherpas, no less—at Burning Man. #LifeGoals, right? The trouble was that in five years all this could be gone. I wiped at my brow. I needed to stay relevant. My investors needed me to stay relevant. I surprised myself when I followed Rachel. We left Cheri behind and picked our way through the chatting Burners, Rachel's arm intertwined in mine like a warm snake.

We started down the broad avenue, tents arrayed around us like medieval battlements. The dust was gritty and hot between my toes. The sand beat against my face and forced its way into my eyes. A pair of women rode past us on cruiser bikes, hair streaming, bodies nude except for thin gold chains circling their foreheads. One of the girls raised an arm in greeting, her full breasts swinging, a dimple in her cheek. I turned my head to watch her.

"Where are you taking me?" My throat was dry. Tears cut channels into my dusty face.

"Not far, but if you don't want to walk we can hitch a ride." Rachel's eyes had lightened in the sun and were now almost the same blue as the sky. She looked otherworldly. I shuddered.

"Yeah, might be a good idea."

A pedicab pulled up next to us. The driver was bare-chested, his hair and skin both nut brown. He smiled at us through tousled curls.

"Headed this way?" he asked.

Rachel hopped onto the seat. I climbed in with some effort. Luckily there was a tasseled parasol over our heads, allowing respite from the sun. Rachel arranged a cushion behind my back. We sat high above the sand. Her breath was hot in my ear.

"When we get there, don't tell Maya about your dinner. I'll go if I must, but she needs to focus on GuruMe. We've only got a few more days here and our list is long," she said.

"I don't get it. Where are we going? Who are you talking about?" I asked. She blinked and laughed.

"You haven't heard of GuruMe, have you? I guess we're smaller than we think. Maybe it's better this way. Maya's got big plans for you." The pedicab stopped in front of a small tent and Rachel led me in. Inside, the air was thin. Dappled shadows crisscrossed the floor and I could almost hear the whisper of green leaves swaying above our heads. An aged man sat meditating in the center of the tent.

I felt a pair of hands grasp my ankles. Cold pinpoints of metal touched my feet as someone removed my shoes.

"Robert? Maya. I've been looking forward to meeting you."

She was stunning. Dark brown hair tumbled down her back, where a patch of bare skin shone through the fabric of her sari. She stood in front of me as a Hindu goddess; curved, seductive, timeless. I blinked. Maya's green eyes were direct, appraising. She took my hand. "Come, darling. We can talk after."

She led me to the old man. Without a word, he embraced us. Everything was still. "Good. You are ready. Drink this." The yogi passed me a small ceramic bowl. Seeing my hesitation, Maya wrapped

my hands in hers and tipped the cup into my mouth. I swallowed the bitter drink. The yogi murmured some foreign words and left.

I felt a cold ease seep into me. Then, for a long while, nothing.

When I came to, Maya was wiping my brow with a cold cloth while Rachel rubbed my feet. "How do you feel, darling?" Maya's smile blinded me. I closed my eyes again. "Wow. What was in that cup?"

"Never mind. You had it within you, you see? This is GuruMe. My passion. What you just experienced is the Nirvana level, of course—what our clients might work years to attain. I gave you the full tour on your first go, so to speak." Maya's giggle was surprisingly girlish. "But I need your help. I have the content and the contacts, but I can't build a viable company without SunTech's resources. Will you help me?"

I laughed. "Ah. You want money. That I know something about." Maya's sari had loosened, revealing the lush curve of her breast. I pulled her towards me. "Everything has its price."

"Darling, you are absolutely naughty!" Maya swatted at me with another giggle. "Not to worry. Rachel will take care of you."

I don't remember much about the return trip. Rachel was chatty and bright. She told me she headed PR for GuruMe. They had a stable of om-gurus in India, trained in social media and ready to connect with Western seekers. Market research showed that the mindfulness trend was set to peak in two years, and the buzz among early adopters so far was awesome. Membership was invite-only, but the plan was a global launch by December.

I tuned her out. Maya had disappeared without saying goodbye. Her smell stayed with me. I'd found a single gold bangle, as small as a child's, tucked into my pocket as I dressed. I wondered how I could see her again. As if reading my mind, Rachel handed me a slim folder. "Sign these. Maya will be in touch." She pecked me on the cheek and climbed back into the pedicab. I watched her disappear into the dust.

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Maya had me hire Mahesh Yogi for a blessing ceremony and made plans to tour GuruMe with me the day after. I had my assistant book two rooms at the Oberoi Bangalore, though with luck we'll only need one. We'd emailed and texted a fair bit after Burning Man, but mainly in bursts. Sometimes she was chatty and open, sometimes distant. Just as I was getting into it, she stopped cold. I missed her, the excitement of seeing her name pop up on my screen. Her last text said: "I miss you," but she never answered my long response. I felt like a fool, but I wanted her.

I slept with Rachel a few times. She would appear at my hotel room in a random city and slip into my bed. I didn't ask how she knew my travel schedule. She laughed when I asked her to be discreet. She was the only one who might've understood.

"Don't tell Maya" I asked.

"But you haven't actually seen her since Burning Man."

"No, but we text a lot." I knew I sounded ridiculous. "I don't know, what I have with her just feels so real, you know."

"Yes," Rachel said. "That's Maya's way."

Rachel's words ran through my mind as the driver zigzagged through heavy traffic. I turned my head to stare at a man standing on the overgrown median. He held a brown bear, its fur matted by grease, by a chain. Every once in a while the bear stood up on its hind legs and clapped its hands, then, head drooping, fell on all fours again. The man walked up and down the road, collecting rupees from bored drivers.

Maya was perched at a small table in the lobby of the hotel by the time I finally arrived. She was talking intensely to a gorgeous redhead. They leaned into each other, laughing, so close their noses almost touched. When she saw me, Maya kissed the redhead goodbye and turned to me.

"Hello, stranger." Her accent seemed thicker today. There were rumors that she was an Indian princess raised in Britain, that the saris she wore were embroidered with real gold, that her perfect breasts and lips came from a Brazilian plastic surgeon. GuruMe broke records the week it launched and stayed on top of the charts for twenty consecutive weeks. Its daily users rivaled Facebook. The western appetite for Nirvana appeared insatiable.

I kissed Maya. She smelled of citrus and flowers. She turned her head and kissed me back, lightly, on my lips. "Thank you for your investment, darling. You were pivotal to GuruMe's success. I won't forget that."

I grabbed Maya's hands. "Listen, I've got an amazing night planned. Have you heard of The Atelier? Fantastic food. It's small. Private. My CFO knows the owner. He'll close the place and cook just for us. We can get to know each other," I said.

"I'm so sorry, darling. I was looking forward to our time together, too. But something's come up. I won't be able to attend your opening tomorrow after all." I felt blindsided and unreasonably angry. What was she saying?

"This is ridiculous! We had a deal, Maya, you can't just ditch me like this!" My voice echoed in the marble hall. Heads turned toward us. Maya kissed me deeply. I felt her tongue snake into my mouth.

"All in good time, darling. I've arranged for my driver to bring you to GuruMe. I'll be waiting for you there." She patted my hand. "Don't worry. Rachel assures me that everything's all set. She's quite something, isn't she? I only give you the best." She left me stunned, her steps ringing against the stone floor.

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The road turned to mud but the driver didn't seem alarmed. He swerved around a small girl walking down the center of the road, spraying red clay onto her. We missed her by inches and she did not flinch. "Slum child, sir," he nodded back at me.

Glass skyscrapers had suddenly given way to low huts at the last intersection, as if the road itself divided first world from third.

We drove past colorful dwellings, their bloated wooden doors sprouting inside yellow walls. Saris and rags hung on laundry lines, obscuring rusted tin roofs. There were children everywhere. They patted the side of the car as we drove past, jogging alongside us with outstretched hands. Other than the kids, no one paid attention to us.

The street was alive with women crouched in circles gossiping and trading and thin men pushing overfilled carts along the side of the street. We came upon a group of men wrapped in loincloths, their chests bared. They were washing a cow, dipping their washcloths into a pink plastic bucket at their feet. Like the others, the men studiously ignored our car, but the cow turned toward me with curious eyes. Its liquid gaze seemed to commiserate with me. We drove into a small opening in the wall and the parked next to a dusty car in a courtyard.

The first thing that hit me was the smell: warm, fetid, sour, the smell of an unwashed crowd. I gagged as it struck me that we are all animals after all. Here there was no need for pretense. There were more essential concerns. Maya walked towards me, arms open in greeting. My heart jumped when I breathed her in.

"Darling! How was your drive?" Maya giggled. "I bet you don't get to see this side of India very often."

"It was—" I struggled for the right word. "—unexpected. What are we doing here? I thought we were touring GuruMe."

"Oh, I have a surprise for you. Because you're special, Rob. Our first investor. You signed the NDA, right?" Maya laughed again and slapped her forehead in mock exasperation. "But of course you have, darling. I received your DocuSign this morning. Oh darling, I'm so excited! Come with me."

We ducked into a low door and entered a large warehouse. It must've covered at least ten blocks.

It looked as if the walls between the tenements had been knocked down and makeshift roofs joined over them. Pale light struggled through uneven windows. I momentarily lost sight as my eyes adjusted to the darkness. The overhead bulbs were unlit.

Inside, the smell was even more overwhelming. Rows of women, men, and young children squatted on the floor, their faces lit blue by the screens in their hands. Black surge protectors snaked through the aisles connecting everyone, charger cables twisting out like the entrails of a decaying creature. A clicking hum pervaded the room. Sharp-eyed young women in polyester suits patrolled the aisles.

A skinny woman in a yellow sari raised a hand. Her other arm was cradling a breastfeeding infant. One of the young women bent down to her. They whispered softly before the older woman resumed her work, tapping and swiping methodically on her screen. The baby slipped off her breast and began crying, but she didn't seem to notice.

"What language are they speaking?"

Maya shrugged. "Oh, there are so many dialects in Bangalore, darling, I don't even know. Luckily, we have our girls. Supervisor level, you see. College graduates, smart as whips, but local so they understand these dialects. Only four hundred rupees a day. A steal, I'd say." Her hand brushed mine. "Proud of me, darling? Keeping our costs down." Her hand was ice cold.

"For the kids, too?" I asked. Maya laughed.

"Oh darling! No, only our best get four hundred. The worker bees on the phones, they're just tapping! Choose the option that best fits the client's query. Tap tap. No skill at all. It's all programmed, you see, but they provide the live element. Our clients are sophisticated, darling, so we can't automate everything, at least not yet. We do pay them, of course, but to be frank it costs GuruMe more in electricity than it does to pay these workers."

The baby was still wailing but no one paid any

attention. Two children sitting near our feet had been staring at me and rubbing their faces, eyes comically agog, but a young woman hushed them with a tap of her stick. Stricken, they bowed down to their phones. The smell intensified as we walked deeper into the room. The workers worked intently. Even the supervisors refused to be distracted. They marched up and down the aisles monitoring each tap, swipe, and click.

"We track everything through the app, you see. Productivity metadata." Maya nodded conspiratorially. "They work in twelve-hour shifts, so GuruMe is always available. Our clients come first."

My head spun. I grabbed at Maya but only touched air. I fell.

I came to in a pale pink room of gold filigree moldings and damask curtains. Astringent air-conditioning blasted into my face. Maya smiled brightly down at me. "Darling, how do you feel?"

"I've been better. Where are we now?"

"Oh, this is my office. More like a refuge, as you can see." Maya giggled. "You and I aren't made for those conditions." She indicated the door, through which I could still hear the hum of the workers. "I rest here during the longer days. Sometimes I bring investors in here. Not easy managing the masses, darling. But soon I won't have to anymore."

I was lying on a low bed in the center of the room. One of the young women walked in with a tea tray. Her kohled eyes avoided mine as if she were ashamed for me. She set down the tray and left. Maya brought a cup to my lips. "Drink. It'll help." I sipped the sweet tea and leaned back. "So, this is GuruMe."

"Yes, darling, what do you think? Oh, but you haven't even seen the best part! Are you ready to walk now? At your own time, of course, darling, but I am so excited to show you. It's the future, really."

"I've seen enough for the day, Maya." I smiled and

patted the mattress. "Maybe you can join me on the bed."

Maya giggled and kissed me lightly on the lips. "This is important work, darling. Time for that later."

I grabbed her arm. "Enough, Maya. You've been jerking me around all week. I'm tired of this!"

"Rob. We have business to attend to." She spoke coldly, barely hiding her disdain.

I let her pull me up. We walked through a door on the far side of the room and stepped into a small room with whitewashed walls that was divided into two sections. Long white desks filled the first half, where men in white polos sat typing quietly as they stared at lines of code scrolling upon a wall-mounted screen. Except for the rapid movements of their fingers, nobody moved.

The other side of the room looked like a lounge, with colorful beanbag chairs strewn haphazardly over a rug. Two hulking leather massage loungers were plugged into an outlet in the corner. Fluorescent light shone brightly over everything. It looked like any other cash-strapped start-up, except for the row of young women who stood at attention against the wall. Six or seven men sprawled on the beanbags, their faces obscured by white helmets.

One of them raised a hand. A young woman bent down and removed his helmet. His eyes were dilated, unseeing. She wiped his brow with a handkerchief and gently embraced him, whispering into his ear.

"This is the next frontier, Rob." Maya swept her arm over the room. Her bangles clattered musically. "We're testing GuruMe in virtual reality. So much neater, isn't it, darling, and less—shall we say—odorous?"

I felt nauseous again. The sightless men lying on the rug resembled overturned insects. "What are you saying? That the gurus in GuruMe will only be code? Isn't that taking it too far?"

Boris Glikman  
**The MePhone**

Maya turned to me with wide eyes. "Oh darling! But did you think there were ever any gurus? Mahesh yogi, sure, but I mean, he's just a marketing tool. Anyway, people aren't really looking for gurus, darling. It was just a hook, as they say." She giggled. "The secret is to know what people want and give it to them. Even if they don't admit to wanting it. Even if they're ashamed of wanting it."

She motioned to one of the young women, who came over and took my hand. Maya took the other. They led me to one of the loungers and pushed me into its soft embrace. Maya gently removed my shoes and buckled a restraint over my legs, then my arms and my torso.

"For your protection, darling. Oh, I'm so excited for you. You're about to get everything you've ever wanted. As I'd promised. You'll see. Our code is more human than human can be."

She pulled a helmet over my head and adjusted the cushion under my neck. I heard a click, then darkness. When I can see again I am sitting on a plush bed, like in the room next door. The scent of bitter citrus floats in the air. There is no one else in the room. I peek out the window, drink some tea, and finally, bored, open the cabinet. Colorful silk lingerie fills the first drawer. The next contains a finely braided horsehair whip and a blindfold. I feel a soft embrace from my back and instinctively lean into it. Maya's strong perfume sucks me in.

"Darling," she giggles, "I'm so glad you're here. What shall we do first? We have all the time in the world."



All one had to do was dial a certain number and one would be connected straight away with oneself. The quality of the reception was so good that the voice on the other end of the line sounded as if it was coming from the very same room. Inevitably, there was some initial apprehension about using this phone, for no one quite knew what kind of a response they would receive when they rang themselves out of the blue for the very first time. What if their unexpected call was considered to be an impudent invasion of privacy?

Eventually these fears subsided, as most found that they were greeted with warmth and enthusiasm and their calls were seen as a pleasant surprise. Talking with yourself was just like talking with a dear friend you hadn't seen for a long time, and conversation flowed easily. People rushed to purchase the new invention, which was marketed as the "mePhone." Suppliers could not keep up with the demand, and there were ugly scenes as customers fought amongst themselves for the last available units.

For mePhone to work properly, certain rules had to be followed, as set out in the Owner's Manual. First, the reception only worked in particular areas, access to which required an extra fee. Second, there was a strict time limit on how long you could spend speaking to yourself. And third, when using

the mePhone, one had to wear special, rather cumbersome apparel that was sold separately from the phone. Also, owing to the technical complexities involved in establishing a connection, the cost of a call was outrageously expensive, though some enterprising phone companies, hoping to capitalize on the popularity of the mePhone, for a limited time only charged a local call rate. The high charge for using a mePhone was partly due to the technical complexities involved in establishing a connection, for there were many impostors who pretended, for their own twisted and devious reasons, to be the voice of your true inner self. Thus, a lot of specialist expertise was required to connect you to the real you.

The biggest technical obstacle to overcome, however, was circumventing getting a busy signal when calling yourself, for if you were calling yourself then that meant you were already on the phone and thus your line must, ipso facto, be engaged. It was an astounding technological achievement that the creative wizards behind the mePhone were able to somehow surmount this paradox and allow people to get through to themselves. How it was actually done remained, for obvious reasons, a tightly guarded industrial secret. There was speculation that it involved utilising the Many Worlds Quantum Theory, so that by using the mePhone a person

was connected to themselves in another parallel Universe.

These inconveniences were more than outweighed by the benefits you gained from having a good chat with yourself, for no one had ever had the time to stop and take a good, honest look at their lives. Everyone was always rushing about, preoccupied with the mundane details of existence, trying to silence the nagging question of whether they were happy with their lives and if they were being true to their inner selves. It was an enlightening experience to be able to have a deep and meaningful talk with oneself. The users of the mePhone could now catch up with all the things in their lives they had never had the chance to think about before.

People found that talking with yourself was a lot like talking to an old confidant, with whom the most intimate matters could be discussed. Not infrequently tears were shed as truths one had been hiding from oneself for many years were conveyed in blunt and forthright terms. Conversations gained a confessional aspect, as darkest secrets known only to oneself were divulged openly over the phone lines. Quite often, surprises were lying in store as people discovered what they were actually feeling inside. At

other times, the voice on the other end of the line would remind of long-neglected dreams, of desires and needs suppressed for far too long. Many found out they weren't really happy in their places of employment. Some realised they had fallen out of love a long time ago. Others saw for the first time that they had deluded themselves as well as others into believing they had reached fulfilment, regardless of how they actually felt inside, recognizing that they had become so comfortable with being miserable and disenchanted that they shrank back in fear when contentment appeared to be within easy reach.

"You're out of milk, down to your last egg, and there's something green and unpleasant on the top shelf. Is it something I said?"

My fridge sends me texts like this all the time. The recipes it emails me are both out of my price range and beyond my culinary competence, but I think that's the point, it wants me to know how disappointed it is in me.

My computer's the same. I no longer bother writing stories, I get as far as the opening paragraph, and it starts interrupting, 'This sentence doesn't make sense', 'Why not set it in ...'. It's gotten to the stage where I just type in a basic idea and the computer writes the story for me. 'A story about technology that's smarter than its user', I typed earlier. "Ah good," the computer replied, "You've started your autobiography. Shall we start with the toaster?"

The toaster! That fucker. It rejects approximately 99.999999% of all bread in the known universe. I wouldn't mind, but it texts me what bread to buy. It even hacked into my bank account so that it could make orders from the specialist baker it likes. Even then, the toaster isn't happy. The bread has to be sliced just right. The toaster and the electric bread slicer get into the most dreadful arguments.

"You need a better job," they all agree on that—the fridge, the coffee maker, the cooker, the central heating system, all of them. I don't earn enough to keep them happy. I get their texts and emails throughout the day.

"You should be more like your neighbor," the kettle

tells me. "He was in the same job as you five years ago, but he did that online course, and now he earns twice what you do. I bet he can afford to descale his kettle every week."

I can't turn on the computer now without that bloody course popping up, and as for the TV, it simply refuses to let me watch anything other than the Serious Study Channel. I've not seen EastEnders for over a month. The fridge is the worst of the lot of them, though.

"I've given up on you," it texted me earlier. "I don't know why I even bother."

Do you remember the glory days when all fridges did was keep your food chilled? Who had the idea of intelligent domestic appliances? When did we decide to make them judge and jury over our lives? Now I can't get into my own house; the security system won't let me in.

"We've decided to upgrade," is all it said in its explanatory email. I try phoning the fridge, but it isn't answering. I'm puzzled, but not for long. The answer is there, sitting on my sofa, watching my TV, with my toaster and coffee maker running round seeing to his every need.

# Privacy Through Technology



I was walking down the stairs of Thompson Hall, coming from my class on "Happiness through Philosophy," when I heard, just behind me, a loud and cheery voice raised in friendly greeting. "Hi," said the female voice. I thought it was a student of mine. Being a polite and gregarious person, I instantly stopped and turned around to return the greeting to the owner of that voice. As I turned I simultaneously opened my mouth to speak, only to discover a student I had never before laid eyes on, seemingly speaking to a disembodied phantom hovering above her head. This sensation lasted only a split second before I realized she had some kind of small black object pressed to her ear and was speaking to this object. I thought this very odd, indeed.

Now, I know that there are people who occasionally, or not so occasionally, talk to themselves. Some people do this because they are unfortunate enough to have no one to talk to or because they have nothing to say to anyone, or because they are extremely shy. But they usually do this in a much more subdued voice. No one wants to be caught communicating with themselves in public. Well, out loud, that is. I am also aware that in ancient times, people worshipped idols and would pray to them. Yet I was pretty sure that no one in twenty-first-century United States carried around a personal minor deity and would speak to it in a loud voice, among a crowd of people.

It took another half second to realize that she was using a cell phone. Now, I'm not sure of the mathematics involved, but if you add the

aforementioned, admittedly vague, "split second" to the recently-mentioned "one half second," it probably would amount to something short of one second. I wonder which is shorter, "one half second" or a "split second?" Is there a recognized definition or measurement of a "split second"? Does the "split" provide an assumption that the second is being split fairly and equally into two halves? Or might it be split into one portion that contains three quarters of the specified second and another section measuring only one quarter? The possibilities are infinite, I suppose. I mention this enigmatic mathematical, or perhaps philosophical or even metaphysical, conundrum only to assure you that my description of this recognition process is taking me a great deal longer to describe than the actual duration of the time expended in arriving at the truth.

I imagine then that you realize the fact is that the cheerful, enthusiastic speaker was not addressing me. She was conversing with some unknown person at the receiving end of a message mysteriously and instantaneously hurtling through the ether. Ah, you say you understood that was the case immediately, and I could have saved myself a great deal of bother by simply stating the facts right at the start? That's a somewhat brutal way to react to my charming account of a simple occurrence to which we're all subjected on a daily basis.

Perhaps you haven't had enough scotch and soda—I've only treated you to three, after all—to drain away the stress of the daily struggle to survive in this electronic age of computers, email, and cell phones

classified as smart—ridiculous—that can tweet and take photographs and who knows what else. Maybe these cursed things can even magically provide you with the ability to speak Swahili or Basque or to understand Einstein's theories in just minutes. Or to perform brain surgery through a tutorial.

Well, let me get to the point, then. Of course there's a point to this; I'm coming to it. What? Oh yes, of course, I'll signal the barkeep to send over two more scotch and sodas. Anyway, my point is: You're almost as old as I am, correct? Yes, well then, you no doubt remember the old days, before the advent of the cell phone, and so many other so-called improvements to our way of life, when both in stores as well as on the sidewalks, there were phone booths. Phone booths! Yes, the word booths is key here. Now, why were there phone booths? Yes, that was a rhetorical question. After all, there could have been, at much less expense, simply phones not enclosed in any booth. The reason for them, of course, was that there was a sort of consensus that people wanted to have privacy when they spoke to friends, relatives, lovers or business associates. Yes, privacy. This is a concept which has basically disappeared from public life.

Back in the 1950s, for example, if someone needed to use a phone, but the only phones to be found were just that: phones. No booths. Surely, you remember how we thought in those days. You wouldn't dream of talking on the phone in public. It would have been as unthinkable as answering the call of nature, shall we say, on a public sidewalk or in the aisle of a department store or supermarket. Well, yes, of course, a person would be arrested. But still, even if it were perfectly legal, no one would do such a thing, even imagine such a thing. Excuse me...? You say I just contradicted myself because I am imagining it right now? Of course. Touché. Well done.

But wait a moment, sir! I said no one would contemplate it back in the Fifties. At any rate, they certainly would not actually do such a thing. Even in today's overly relaxed, do-whatever-turns-you-on milieu. What? "Not yet, anyway," you say? Yes, you certainly have a point there. Ever since the "let-it-all-hang-out" culture took root at the end of the

1960s, there has been a veritable cultural revolution. I mean, come on . . . In the Fifties, both professors and students would wear a jacket and tie to class. Don't get me started on what students wear to attend class these days. Or what they don't wear in warm weather. Ah, you say you had no intention of getting me started. Right.

Back to cell phones. People just don't care about privacy anymore. I think we've become an exhibitionist society. People actually want the public at large to know what they're doing, no matter how personal the subject. They seem to feel that everyone else is intensely interested in their affairs, presumably because they are convinced they are such fascinating people. Amazing, isn't it? Perhaps they feel they're in some sort of reality show, which of course would turn them into instant celebrities.

You know, the other day I was on the treadmill when some man, about 30 years of age, I'd say, mounted the treadmill right next to mine. He was going at a very slow pace; only the first row of lights lit up to show the difficulty level. He wasn't even working up a sweat. But he was on the cell phone, talking to some friend or associate about some business deal. He was conversing about picking up some auto part and discussing what price he was willing to pay for it. The object was to install the part into an old car and then sell the car at a good profit. The whole conversation dragged on for fifteen minutes, with a great deal of repetition, and he was handling this business deal in a booming voice. He was shouting into the phone at the top of his lungs through the entire dreary conversation. I'm convinced that everyone in the health club could clearly hear his words. It was as though he were talking through a bullhorn. Unless his associate happened to be in China or Australia, I believe this man didn't even need the phone for his business partner to hear every word he uttered. And I happened to be on the treadmill right next to his. I thought I would lose my hearing.

Now, I ask you, why on earth was he bellowing into the phone like that? Hmmm...? Oh, yes, of course. Another rhetorical question. I beg your pardon. I think he felt he was some kind of wheeler dealer engaged in an important transaction, or perhaps

Ryan Shane Lopez  
**Man's Plane Ride**

just wanted everyone in the health club to think so. Mercifully, after fifteen minutes of the ruthless attack on my auditory nerves, he finished his thunderous monologue, and descended from the treadmill. Oh, you say it wasn't a monologue; it was a dialogue. Well, perhaps. But I have a sneaking suspicion that there was actually no one on the other end of this deafening rant. I suspect he was pretending to be talking to a real person on the phone, but was really addressing himself to everyone at the health club. He was playing a part in some imaginary reality show. What? Oh, of course, that would make it an unreality show. I guarantee you, however, he would have been voted off the island, so to speak, or at least ejected from the health club for causing severe cases of hearing loss to the members.

And, you know, it's similar to the person driving a car with the windows wide open and his cassette player (or would it be a CD or DVD nowadays?) emitting the sounds of punk rock or heavy metal, turned on with highest volume possible, the singer actually shrieking the incomprehensible words, the bass booming away so that you feel the vibrations reverberating in your head, your skeletal structure and your vital organs. And I'm convinced they do this because they feel their musical tastes are so superior to everyone else's, and they want to display this superiority to the world at large. Why? No, no, not an actual question. I'll tell you why. So they will be admired for their avant garde taste in music. All right, all right... Too many concrete examples. I'll get to my point immediately. What's that you said? It sounded something like "That boat has already sailed." Oh, you were just clearing your throat. I see.

Well then, to the point. My question is: Why do people not have any sense of privacy anymore? I'll tell you why. Well, yes, it was just a rhetorical question. Yes, again. Yes, I realize I tend to do that. I think they feel superior to everyone else and want to display this imagined superiority in order to be admired by one and all. And why, you ask, do people today have that desire when people didn't use to. It's because of having been subjected to overdoses of self-esteem indoctrination in school, both primary and secondary schools.

"Why am I telling you all this?" you ask. Well, because you're the editor of Profound Thinking Review, and I would like to know if you'd be interested in publishing an article of mine on this very subject. I think I have some really ice-breaking, revolutionary, cutting-edge, seminal, insightful thoughts on our changing culture, and I would like the public to know about it. Well, of course, they would then know me and admire me for my penetrating analyses on this all-important subject. It would be only natural, their admiration for me, that is.

Ah, I see you are standing. Oh, you have to be leaving now to make your commuter train. Well, you're perfectly welcome to the drinks, I assure you. It's a pleasure to be talking to the Editor-in-Chief of such a prestigious journal. Why are you putting those headphones on?

I'm on the flight home.

I'm hot. I don't remember once being cold on an airplane. I sat down and immediately shed as many layers as I could. Now, I can't find a place for all my crap. There's never enough room on planes. Airplanes always look bigger in movies due to the fourth wall, which is the imaginary wall that separates the audience from the actors. We know there's more going on behind the scenes. We're just not aware of our awareness, unless they break the fourth wall by spinning the camera around to reveal all the crew and mics and props and extras. People look taller in movies too, which is because close-ups are usually centered on the nose or even as low as the chin. Our brains naturally assume the camera is where our eyes would be, which creates the perpetual sense of being half a head shorter than anyone on screen. Tom Cruise is only 5'7".

I know what it's like to talk into someone's chin because I'm a short person, which means nobody loves me. Randy Newman—I keep telling you to listen. There's something genius about that song. Anyway, the fourth wall makes the world of the movie appear larger than the real world. Until you realize you're staring at a 6-inch screen on the back of someone's headrest. Our eyes are cameras and the space behind them is actually far greater than the

space they're filming, but we can't spin the camera around. Planes always show movies now, even when the flight is less than two hours. Our incessant distractions are hindering our ability to experience reality, just like our increasing capacity to absorb more information is destroying our ability to retain it. I read on the internet that some people suffer from "sleep texting".

Last time I flew, the woman in front of me complained to the stewardess that the film her son was watching featured too many "scantly clad women". I told her the stewardess wasn't responsible for monitoring what her children watched, she was. She asked the stewardess if she could move seats, which was fine with me because I can't deal with people who say "scantly clad". Just like I can't deal with people who tell me there's tryptophan in turkey or remind me to lift with my legs. No shit. Outside of that one phrase, when does anyone use the word scantily or clad in normal conversation? Stewardess is considered offensive now, which is silly because even though they used to be blatantly objectified by airlines to sell more tickets, the word stewardess is simply the feminine form of steward, which means one charged with managing a person's property, which is in no way demeaning or suggestive. People don't appreciate words. Some German words have uber specific meanings that can't be directly translated



into English. Like doppleganger. Or fernweh, which means “distance pain”, which is a deep-rooted longing to be anywhere besides your current location. Flying always agitates my fernweh.

Airplane air isn't hot so much as dry and stale. I'm breathing in other people right now. Their dead skin cells and the secretions from their follicles are filling the air that's filling my lungs. A guy across the aisle hacked up a yellow blob into a kleenex and now I'm breathing that, which is disturbing. But I'm filling their lungs too, so I guess that's fair. Disgusting, but fair. I wouldn't mind breathing in your evaporated secretions. I don't mind the idea of absorbing bits of someone else, if it's someone I'm comfortable with. But these people are all strangers. An airplane ride is a confined group of strangers traveling toward a common destination, absorbing bits of each other along the way. I read on the internet that our cells are in a constant process of death and regeneration, which means we're literally always changing, that we're never exactly who we were or who we'll become. A girl wrote in my high school yearbook “Don't ever change”, which was ironic. It was also bullshit because she hardly even knew me. There's this theory that our memories are stored somewhere in our chromosomes, which means our memories could be constantly decomposing and regenerating along with our cells, which could be why memory isn't reliable. It's like the guy in Memento said—it's genius, I keep telling you—he said memory can change the color of a room. Emotions are more powerful than facts, which is why people remember what they heard, not what was said. They don't remember the words, but how the words made them feel. Maybe for us, memory has changed more than the color of the room.

I'm hot again. I put my jacket back on because the guy next to me is overweight and he kept brushing against my bare elbow. Touching strangers is always awkward. Airlines overbook flights on purpose, which is why their employees hold reverse auctions over the intercom to see who's willing to show up late to Thanksgiving in exchange for a voucher while travelers wait each other out to see how much they can profit off of poor corporate planning. I read on the internet that men who are morbidly obese—Who says morbidly in normal conversation?—really fat men can suffer from a condition called “buried

penis”, which means their penis gets buried in their own fatty tissue surrounding the shaft, which causes urine to pool up, which leads to soft tissue infection. It can inhibit their ability to have intercourse. That's what I'm thinking about this guy sitting next to me. Instead of asking where he's from or what he's doing for the holiday, I'm wondering if his obesity is literally cockblocking him. Pretty messed up, right? I also read that the Oxford English dictionary added a definition of literally that means to intentionally exaggerate the nonliteral use of a word, which is actually figuratively, which is literally the opposite of literally, which is the definition of ironic. I blame the internet. The internet is why I know 19th century doctors believed that masturbation caused of all kinds of problems including paralysis and gonorrhea and even insanity. I don't think I'd be such an ass if the world were full of normal people.

I don't think I was an ass in Korea. Koreans are small. In Korea, I could look people in the eye instead of staring into their neck creases and wondering if that's where the smell is coming from. Koreans also wore surgical masks in public, which should be a mandatory practice on airplanes. During the safety demonstration, I had to resist asking if I could wear my oxygen mask the entire trip, which made me think of Fight Club, when they replace the cartoons in the safety pamphlets with ones of people screaming. In Taoism, Qi means “the circulating life force”, but it can also be translated as “air” or “breath”, which is one reason East Asians wear masks, to protect the balance of their Qi. In Hebrew, one of the words for soul is also translated “breath” because in Genesis it says God made man and breathed life into him, which means when you kiss someone you're sharing your soul with them because you're sharing your breath, which means you're absorbing bits of each other, which makes me wish I hadn't kissed certain girls.

On my way to Korea, I had a 12 hour flight from LA to Tokyo and every time I looked out the window it was sunset, like time was standing still. On the flight back, I landed seven hours before I'd taken off on the same day. Flying is the closest man has come to time travel. We should abolish daylight savings. Time is an illusion. Lunch time, doubly so. Louis C. K. says people are being ridiculous and ungrateful when they complain about flying because before

planes, trains, and automobiles, it took years to cross from one side of America to the other and you'd arrive with a different group of people than you left with because some had died and others had been born. Someday, people will travel across the country in a matter of seconds, like in Star Trek when they beam from a spaceship to the surface of a planet, which would mean I could make this trip without sitting beside a stranger for hours, which would mean you and I could be having lunch sooner. But I could never travel via transporter. The thought of having my molecules deconstructed and zapped through the air to be reassembled miles away terrifies me. Some of my cells would likely be left behind. Even worse, all the dead cells and evaporated secretions floating in the air wherever I rematerialized would be absorbed into my body. I'd end each trip a slightly altered version of myself, which is simply speeding up the ongoing process of cellular change, which is time travel. I think I'm comfortable with the present rate of growth. Besides, cross-country teleportation would likely cost an arm and leg.

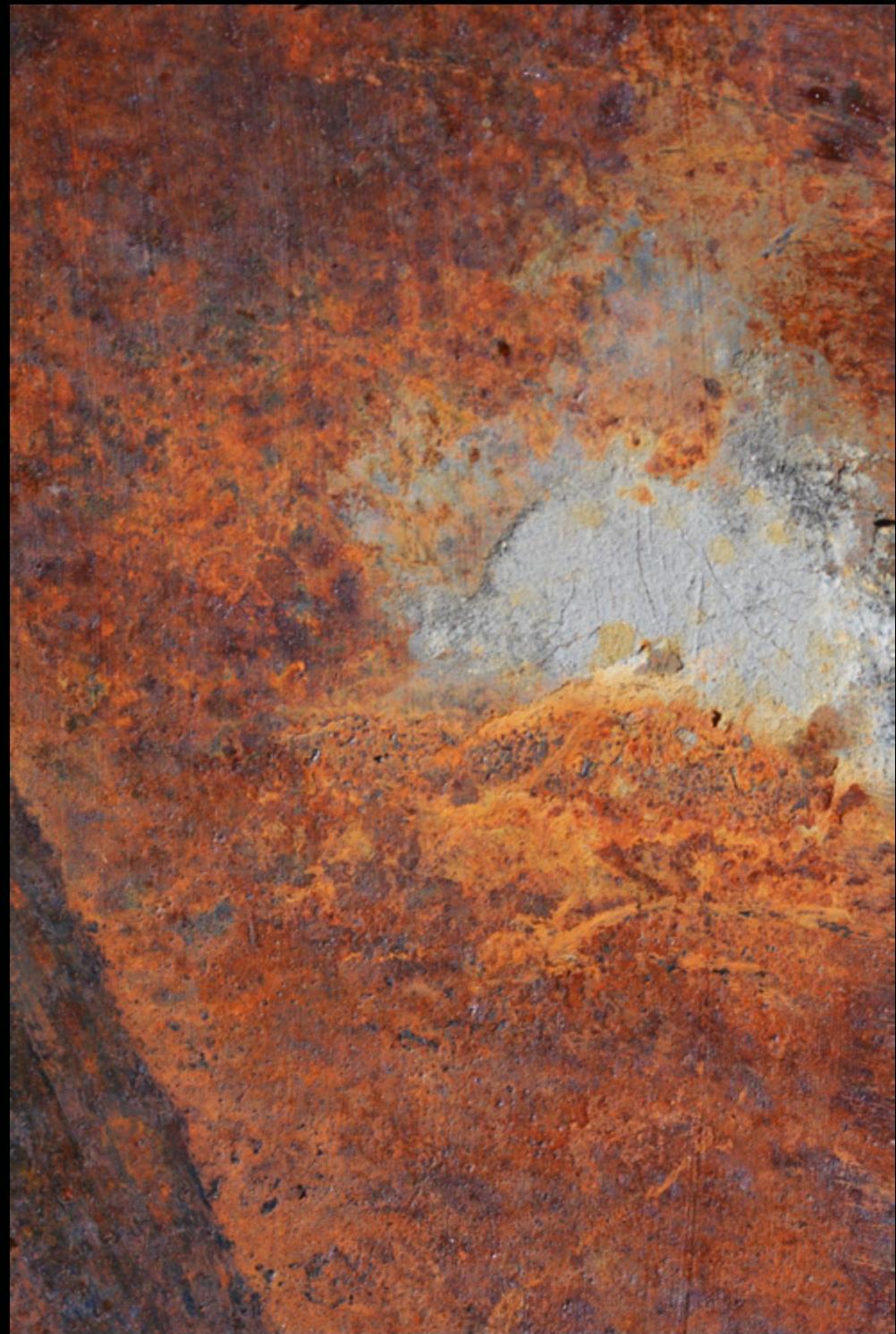
They're telling us to put our electronic devices away, which means I've been typing most of this flight and still haven't said anything I planned on saying. I wanted you to know a few things before we met for lunch tomorrow. But I've just been rambling. Maybe there's an uber specific German word that accurately captures everything I can't seem to say. But it wouldn't translate. What you need to know is that this is who I am—a guy who pretends his life is a movie in which he's the writer, narrator, and main character, in one, who's neurotic and judgmental and full of fernweh, but instead of searching for purpose spends significant portions of the plot wondering about obese penis syndrome. I wish, for your sake, that I could speed up the process of change. I wish I could step off this plane a different person than when I boarded it, but I will try to understand if you can't wait.

# VISUALS

AMY JACKSON  
GHOSTS IN THE MACHINERY





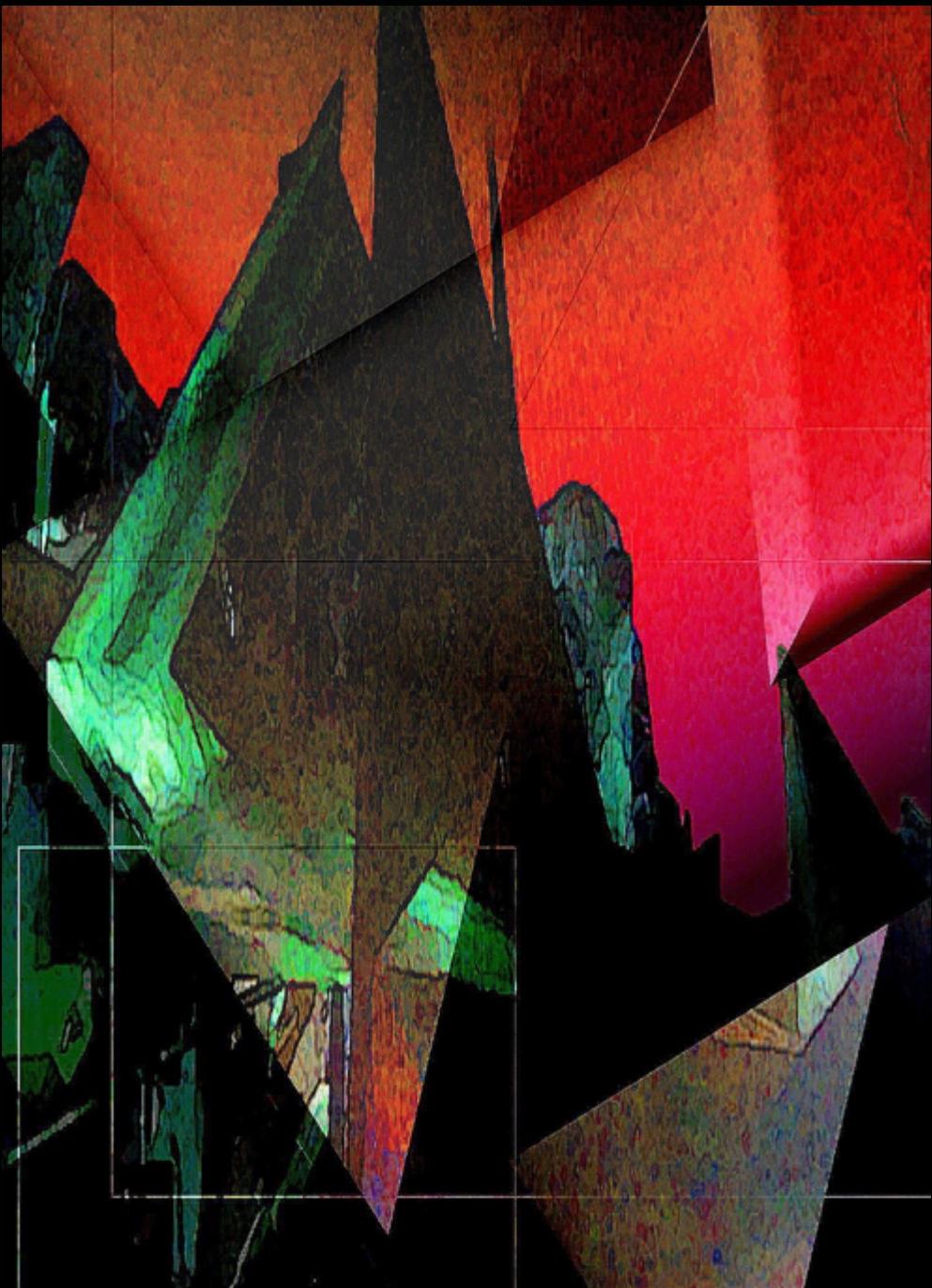


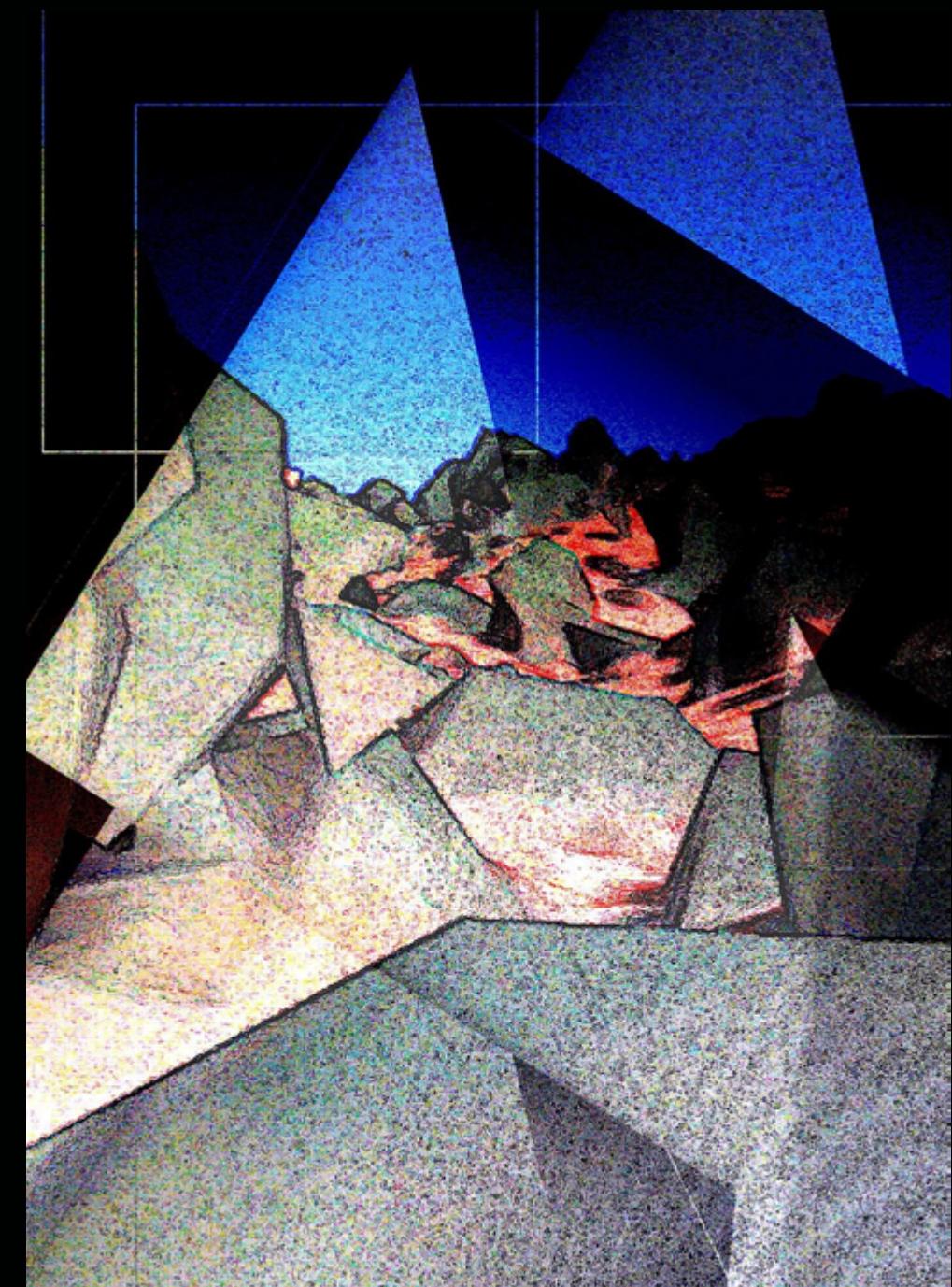
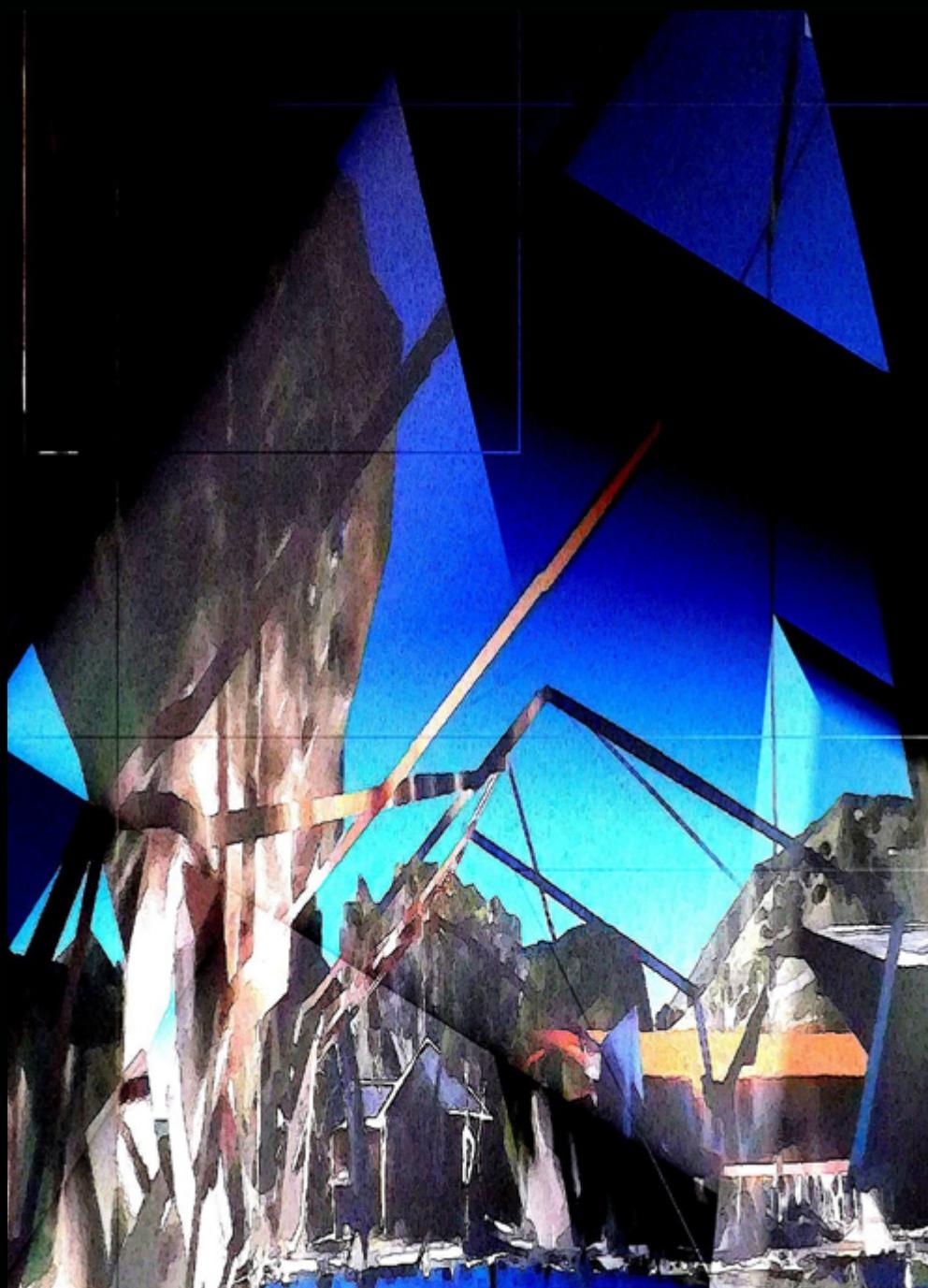
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ALEX NODOPAKA  
EARTHLY ABSTRACTS





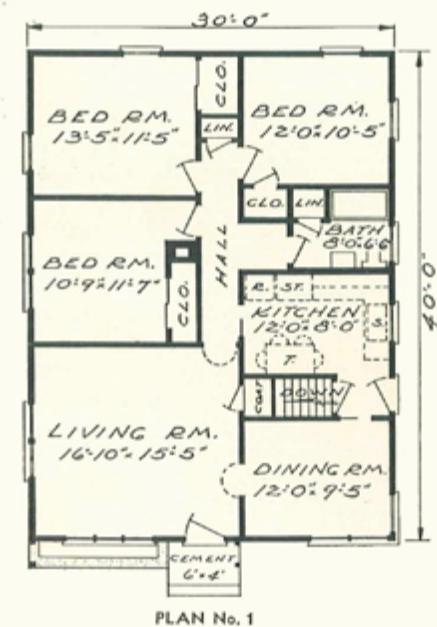
POESÍA

Douglas Luman  
Four Poems from PREFAB



*The Coronet*

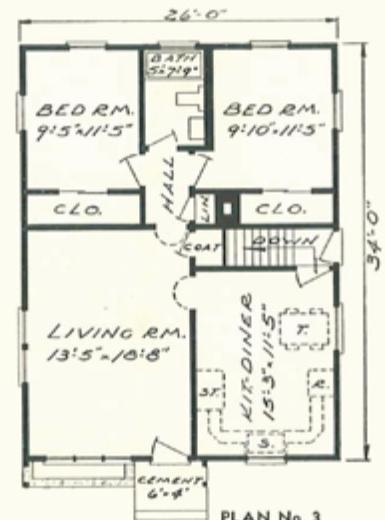
Look —



PLAN No. 1

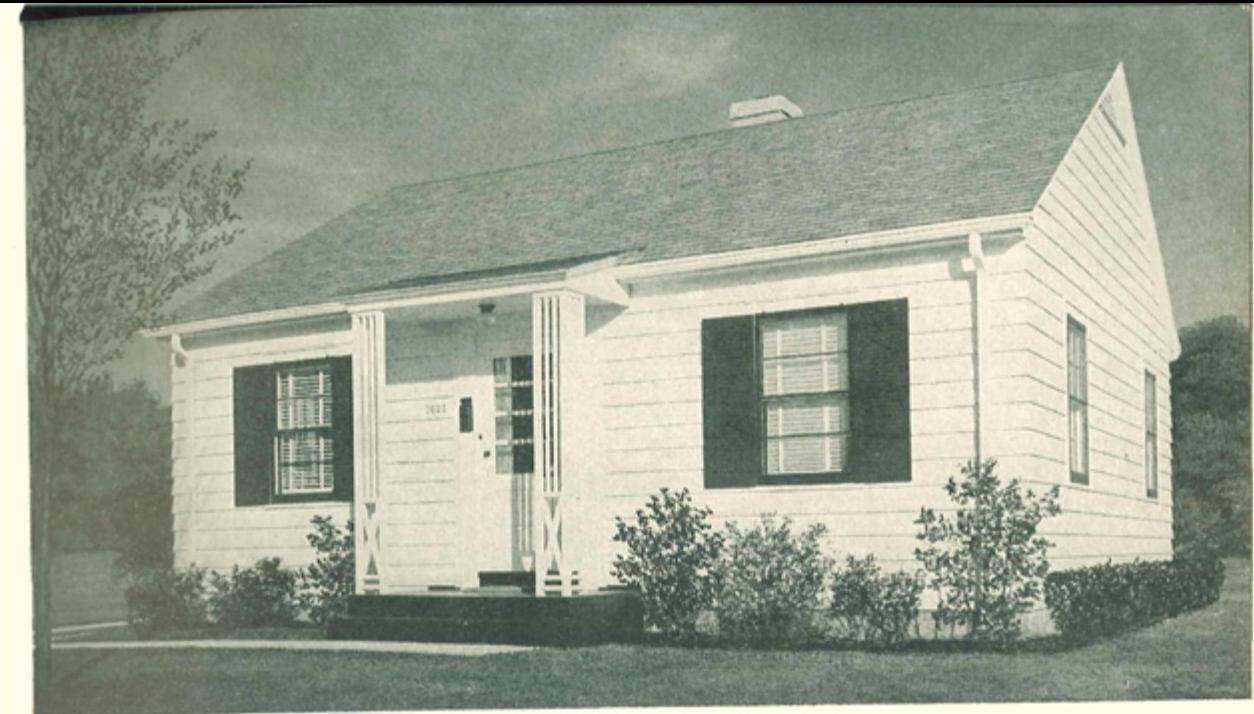
details are short and contrast  
is pastel a shade

Study the  
fictions.



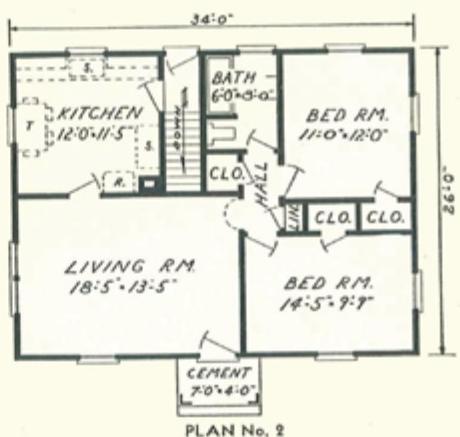
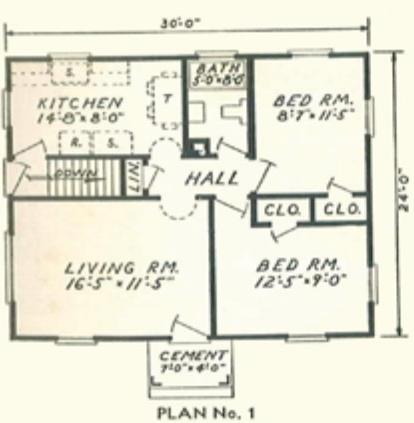
PLAN No. 3

YOU KNOW WHAT YOU GET WHEN YOU  
BUY  
A  
FIC TION

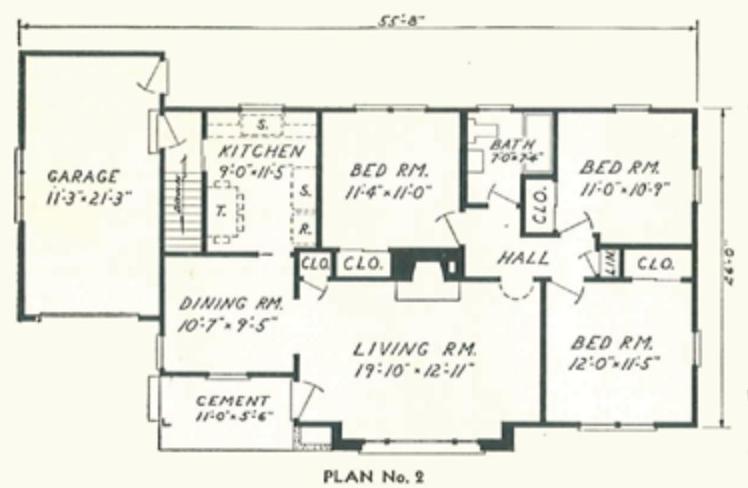


*The Highwood*

money never comes back.



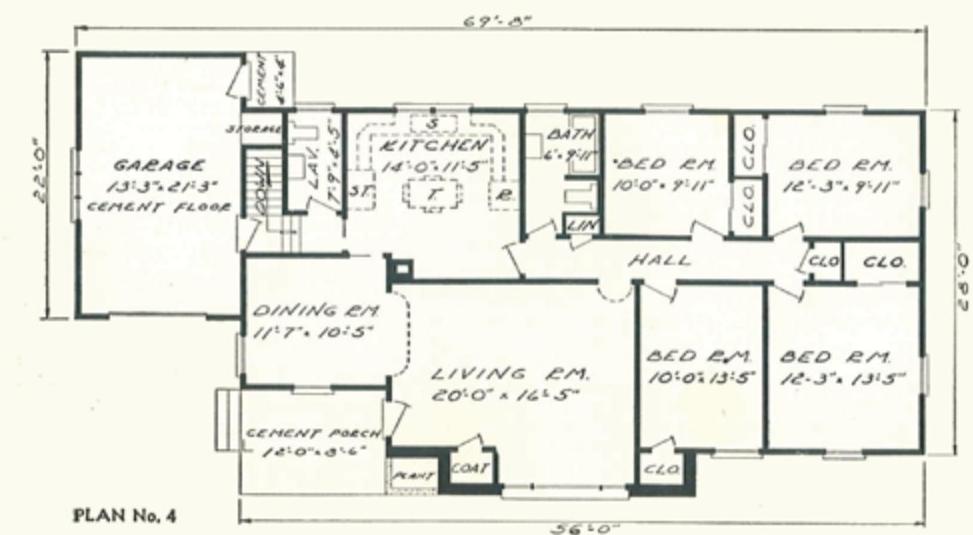
*The Plaza*



Notice that everything is  
"under cover." Even

the sweep of  
note

"shakes"  
stone



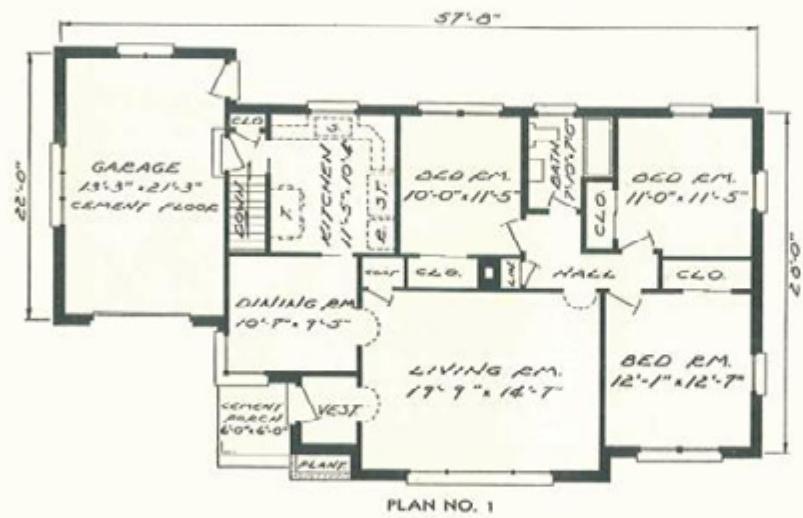
—Advertisement



## *The Saratoga*

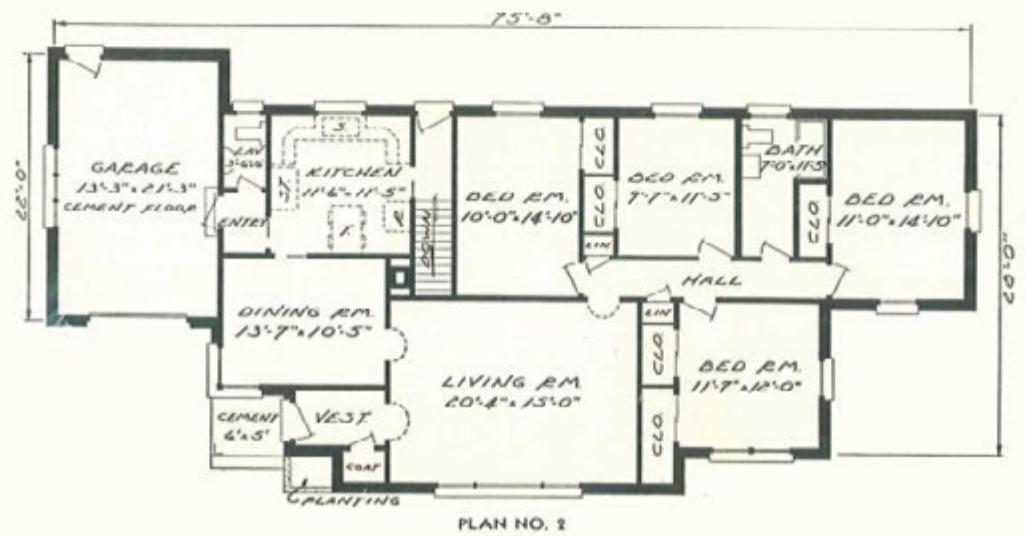
to this spirit

have been added



home

many will  
shake walls



22

On the surface, it looks swell.  
It glitters like a kitchen tabletop  
across which a casual thief  
has spilled a sack of diamonds.

Men and women put out to it  
in the boats at their disposal,  
the cigarettes of experience,  
the liners of formal education.

It is a sea of teeth. You may sail  
around the same sad, small swirl  
of seaweed for hours, like sewage  
circling the bull's eye of a drain,

or you may flush right through  
only to come upon vast shores,  
the inland seas of IT that will  
more unfold than open to you,

and when you pitch your tent  
by one of these, it is painless:  
their teeth so big, their throats  
so round, it could take years,

a whole career, for you to fathom  
that you've been chewed and  
swallowed. Even its short name  
is a kind of warning, like YHWH.

**Hell's pioneering cathode ray typesetting machines by Hannah Lamb-Vines**

*prologue*

we build up from the scraps  
    pain has always penetrated  
i said sappho, what fragments did not  
build up  
unfinished business

said sappho: ENOUGH!

[and it should be enough to  
    sleep through the centuries  
    and wake on my door  
    step warmed by the ink

jet]

then said sappho: I will make them remember us.  
said the poets: we remember us.

I will make them remember  
    past the pain of the future.  
    papyrus is better than stone  
    to scribble but it rips so  
        easy!]

what fragments will they find?

[what fragments will we leave behind?]

dream that you are sappho you walk along a garden path  
    trees tower  
    they tunnel  
how can you recognize a body but still not name it ?  
    beauty                       knowledge

what s missing

laughter listen laughing like look lol lmao

hahahahaha

want to walk with me sappho want to want with me sappho want me sappho want you

dream flowers in tresses locks locked up  
locked away locked

out

at times the tunnel widens

stretches or shrinks

does it ever end?  
    hard  
    to

no.

*upon her arrival*

stripped stringy braids unwoven  
streaked strips rolls drenched drop  
by drop by drips

ERROR: overheated

ERROR: document lost

reference deskless library with a full-service screen  
blue deaf to the screams of a poet thrown into a buffering stream  
  
she remains half loaded, a glitchy print out.  
i said: sappho, the printer is the current most sentient form of technology.

## sen·tient

/'sen(t)SH(ē)ənt/

*adjective*

able to perceive or feel things.

"she had been instructed from birth in the equality of all sentient life forms"

*synonyms:* (capable of) feeling, living, live; [More](#)

*act mmxv: the future,*  
when she arrived buttoned  
up zipped shut loud flashes  
missing thunder and NO.

Aphrodite was not on my door  
step or in my bedroom or on  
my subway, but Marshall was burning through my  
telephone.

the poets say: keep looking  
their necks bent at right angles  
like cranes make you wonder  
what they're building up from  
[do they even believe in it?]

J. Bradley  
**Yelp! Reviews**

she was everything she'd always been but  
a believer in the metaphors never knows  
how to behave when they're proven right

she was nothing she'd never been but whole

**United Technologies Carrier Corp.**

America is made great again on the backs of those who benefit the least from greatness. Here, democracy is more of a pyramid scheme. Citizens stand at the foot of it and wait with open mouths for scraps to trickle down that never do.

**Cincinnati Zoo**

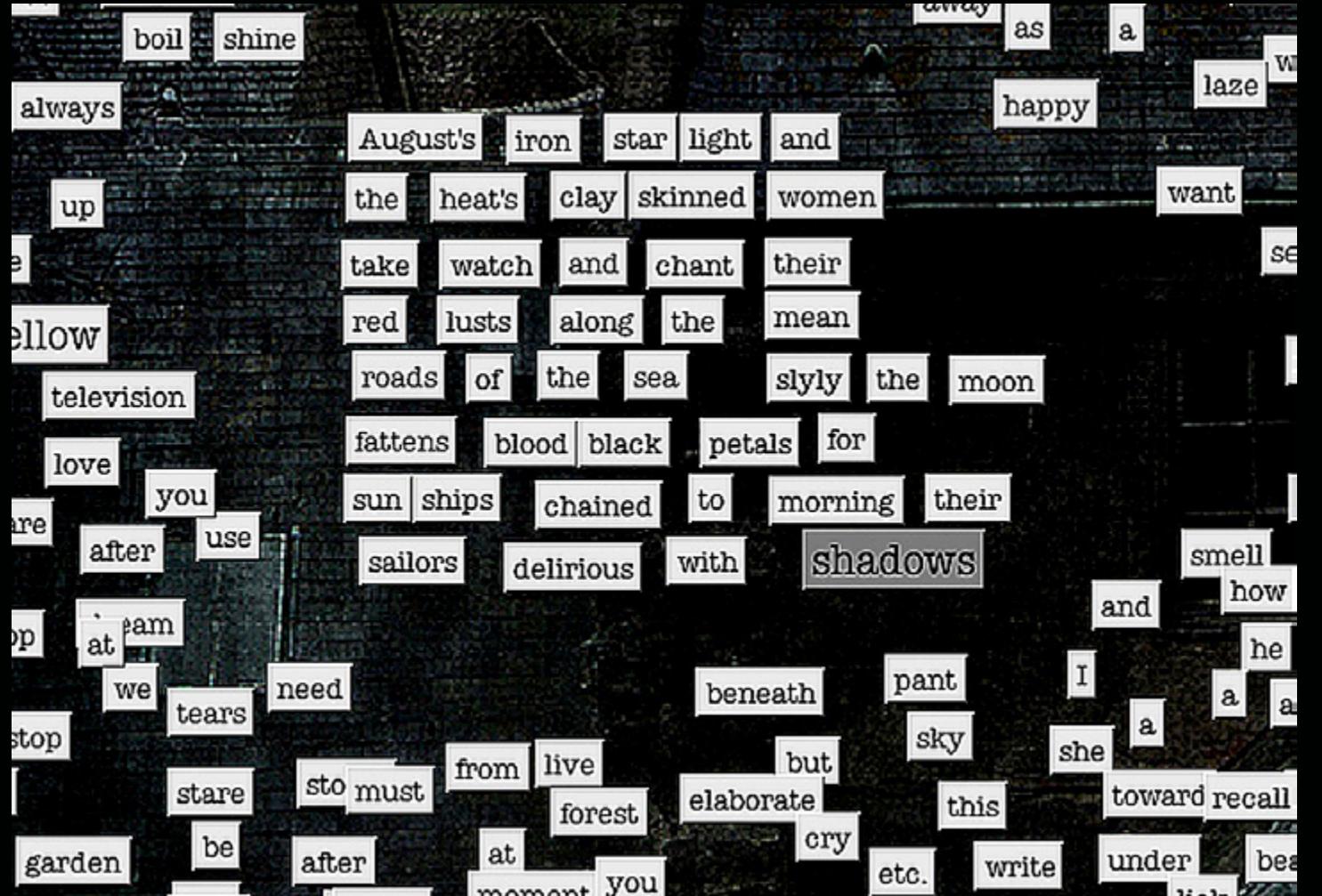
Everyone becomes an expert with enough outrage. Just ask the armchair parents who think they could juggle children like knives. Just ask the armchair zookeepers who think they know where bullets should belong but never tell you where.

**Plop Prop**

With the right chemicals, memory becomes a necropolis. You fashion a tour guide out of your regrets, ask it to take you to the buildings with the most broken windows. You tear down the necropolis when sobriety dawns on you but you never lose the architecture or the building material.

**Trump International Hotel DC**

This is where what surfaces lives after the swamp has drained. Here, they count what is hoarded or stolen. At night, they practice husbandry with their latest corpse brides, ditch them after they ask the wrong (or any) questions.



**Amber Norman** is a free-verse poet and creative nonfiction writer based in Orlando, FL. She uses narrative to explore the human psyche, particularly the struggles related to women. As a spoken word artist, she is a former member of the poetry troupe Black on Black Rhyme based in Tallahassee, FL. Currently, she favors obscure venues for performance. She fancies meditative journalling, espresso, and primitive camping.

**Sarah Bigham** teaches, writes, and paints in Maryland where she lives with her kind chemist wife, their three independent cats, and an unwieldy herb garden. A Pushcart nominee, her poetry, fiction, and nonfiction have appeared in Bacopa, Entropy, Fourth & Sycamore, The Quotable, Rabbit, Touch, and other great places for readers and writers. Find her at <http://www.sgbigham.com>.

A resident of NY, **Stephen Mead** is a published artist, writer, maker of short-collage films and sound-collage downloads. His latest P.O.D. amazon release is an art-text hybrid, "According to the Order of Nature (We too are Cosmos Made)", a work which takes to task the words which have been used against LGBT folks from time immemorial. In 2014 he began a webpage to gather links of his poetry being published in such zines as Great Works, Unlikely Stories, Quill & Parchment, etc., in a site called Poetry on the Line.

**Adedayo Adeyemi Agarau** is a poet from Nigeria.

**Jon Chopan** teaches creative writing at Eckerd College. He received his MFA from The Ohio State University. His first book, Pulled from the River, was published by Black Lawrence Press (2012).

His work has been published or is forthcoming in Glimmer Train, The Southampton Review, Epiphany, Hotel Amerika, Hobart, and elsewhere.

**Reece Rogers** is a creative writing student at the University of Kansas.

**Artyv K** is a writer and an eternal connoisseur of the smaller things in life. Her works have appeared in The Madras Mag and is forthcoming in NILVX.

**Eva Cherokee El Beze** grew up in San Francisco, CA in an anarchist theatre collective. Eva has been published in multiple magazines, journals and books as well as won awards for stage and film scripts. She divides her time between India, Europe, Africa and California.

**Clive Aaron Gill**'s short stories have appeared in numerous Internet magazines. Born in Zimbabwe, Clive has lived and worked in Southern Africa, North America and Europe. He received a degree in Economics from University of California, Los Angeles and lives in San Diego.

**Jenny Fan Raj** lives and works in San Francisco, where she teaches at the California College of the Arts and is working on a novel and a short story collection. Her writing has been published or is forthcoming in The Columbia East Asian Review, The New Engagement, and Flash Fiction Magazine.

**Boris Glikman** is a writer, poet and philosopher from Melbourne, Australia. The biggest influences on his writing are dreams, Kafka and Borges. His stories, poems and non-fiction articles have been published in various online and print publications,

as well as being featured on national radio and other radio programs.

**Dave Clark** was born in Essex and lives in Cambridge, though his stories are mostly set in Swansea, New York and London, and occasionally outer space. His stories have also appeared in the charity anthologies 50 Stories for Pakistan and 100 Stories for Queensland.

**Clark Zlotchew** is Emeritus Professor of Spanish-language literatures. He has had 17 books published, but only three of them are his own fiction. His short-story collection, Once Upon a Decade: Tales of the Fifties, was one of three finalists in the Next Generation Indie Book Awards, 2011. Newer stories have appeared in Scrutiny Journal and in Jotters United in 2016, while another story was one of three winners in a contest of Baily's Beads, literary magazine of U. of Pittsburgh, and was published in that journal in January 2017. Another story is scheduled for April 12 in Sick Lit Magazine.

**Ryan Shane Lopez** is a high school English teacher in Texas. He holds a Bachelor of Arts in Music and a certificate of creative writing from The Attic Institute in Portland, OR.

**Douglas Luman**'s poetry and prose has been published in magazines such as Salamander, Ocean State Review, Rain Taxi, and Prelude. He is Art Director at Stillhouse Press, Head Researcher at [appliedpoetics.org](http://appliedpoetics.org), a book designer, and digital human.

**Bruce Sager**'s poetry has gained publication through competitions judged by Billy Collins, Dick Allen

and William Stafford. His newest work, The Indulgence of Icarus—a book-length poem! (sounds scary, but an easy read)—was recently released by Echo Point, and is henceforth available through Amazon, as is Famous, which was awarded the 2014 William Matthews Poetry Prize.

**Hannah Lamb-Vines** is a media creator and consumer. A Texas transplant, she now divides her time between Brooklyn, NY, Manhattan, NY, and the bridges and tunnels that run between.

**Jesse Bradley** is a Best of the Net and Pushcart Prize nominated writer whose work has appeared in numerous literary journals including decomP, Hobart, and Prairie Schooner. He was the Interviews Editor of PANK, the Flash Fiction Editor of NAP, and the Web Editor of Monkeybicycle, and is now the curator of the Central Florida reading series There Will Be Words. He received his MFA in Writing from Lindenwood University.

**Maurice Smith** lives in the North West of England. He studied Comparative Religion and Ancient History, with an especial interest in ancient curse tablets and binding spells. If he had to recommend a poet it would be Huidobro.

**Cover, Visuals / Alex Nodopaka** originated in Ukraine-Russia in 1940. Studied at the Ecole des Beaux Arts, Casablanca, Morocco. Full time author, artist in the USA. His interests in the visual arts and literature are widely multi-cultural.

**Essais Cover, Visuals, "Killology," "mePhone" / Seth Simon** is working to keep film photography alive in the digital age. He uses vintage cameras and minimal computer editing to achieve his unique images. Whether it is a person, object or street scene, he aims for a photograph that captures the romance, the history, the essence that will strike a similar chord in the viewer's mind as it did in his.

**Poesia Cover, Visuals / Amy Jackson**

**Imaginação Cover / Nick Holland**

**Layout & Design / Lucianna Chixaro Ramos**

**Black Walls**

**(H)erasure**

**Lost Art Found**

**Reawakened Dirge to Pilgrims Breathing Vacant**

**Knapsack**

**The Mercenary**

**Present Day**

**Bus Surveillance**

**Wanting**

**Man's Plane Ride**

**Privacy through Technology**

**Help**

THANK YOU



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The idea for Obra / Artifact came about on an MFAotA art excursion led by core faculty member Cyriaco Lopes in San Miguel de Allende, Mexico. Cyriaco listened to our fantasies and guided us in O / A's first phases. Chantel Acevedo was also integral in Obra / Artifact's founding: on the harrowing drive from San Miguel back to the Mexico City Airport, it was Chantel who encouraged us to make our print version postcards.

We would also like to thank all of the faculty and visiting artists from whom we have drawn so much inspiration: Jena Osman, Urayoán Noel, Michal Lemberger, Tracie Morris, Jessica Lee Richardson, Jeffrey Renard Allen, Matt Roberts, Mark Powell, Laura Mullen, Ronaldo V. Wilson, Edwidge Danticat, John Warley, Francisco Goldman, Rodrigo Toscano, Julia Elliot, Amaranth Borsuk, and Patricia Engel.

Most importantly, thank you to all of our contributing authors and artists. Without your talent, these pages would hold no meaning.

Rebecca Renner, Lucianna Chixaro Ramos, and Jared Alan Smith

The Editors